

Editorial

In April 2009, I attended the European Social Action Network Conference, ENSACT, in Dubrovnik, where I presented a paper on *The importance of groupwork in social action and bringing about change*. In a packed room, I outlined the importance that groupwork can play in bringing people together to ensure that their collective voice can be heard. I argued that this need is more urgent than ever before because of the current economic crisis – where it is likely that more and more people will become the innocent victims of the ‘social evils’ that foster greed, social inequalities and a disregard for the plight of others. As a result, it is predicted that we will see higher rates of unemployment, homelessness and poverty and other manifestations of a breakdown in social cohesion and in our capacity to care for one another as human beings. We are also likely to encounter a situation where *spin* (lying) and *sleaze* (corruption) become more commonplace and where truthfulness becomes a hidden but valued human quality that must be protected and treasured.

Yet the current economic crisis also provides opportunities – a point that was emphasized in a brilliant presentation by Ian Ferguson of the University of Stirling. In a blistering attack on the four ‘social evils’ identified in a publication from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, namely individualism, greed, a decline in community and a decline of values (Grayling 2008), Ferguson argued that the introduction of managerialism (New Public Management) and the ‘elevation of centralised targets over addressing urgent human need’ (Ferguson 2009) has led social work – and other professions – to the point where ‘What works – doesn’t work’.

Ferguson’s keynote address linked closely with my presentation where I suggest one way forward in response to the economic, social and professional crises we face involves creating a different and better type of professional care – a development that this is only possible if we acknowledge the importance of bringing people together in groups so that new alliances are forged. This will not be an easy task, and it is one that involves considerable knowledge and skills (Trevithick 2005).

One of the consequences of the current climate is that people are likely to become more defensive - more guarded, mistrustful and isolated from other people and the world around them - and needing to retreat into themselves and their own family and social network. It is at this point that important relationships and connections can be lost which I described in my presentation as follows:

It is often this ability to see the relationship between *personal troubles* and *public issues* (Mills 1959: 130) that can help people to come to sort out and work through feelings of shame, self blame and guilt – feelings that can keep people isolated from one another or blaming certain sectors of society for problems that are located in poor life chances and a structure of disadvantage. It is practitioners' ability to identify and describe these processes in a group context that can lead to social action and the opportunity to bring about change and more equitable and fair society.

Recognising the impact of disadvantages on people's life chances can create a dilemma for practitioners, including groupworkers. For example, if we adhere to the groupwork principle which states 'what is said in the room, stays in the room', what responsibility do we have to address the 'social evils' that lead to 'social pain'? We could say that the responsibility to address these issues lies with the group members– but we can liken this situation to a metaphor borrowed from Lerner (1972): if we find ourselves working in a malaria-infested swamp, helping people who are suffering from the consequences of being infected may be an appropriate professional and humane response but one that has serious limitations if we do not – simultaneously – attend in some way to prevent new infections by draining the swamp.

However, taking action in this way needs to be thought through very carefully to ensure that the boundary of our work with different groups is not adversely affected. Becoming a social activist may not be compatible with the rules of confidentiality or the changes we are working to achieve as groupworkers. However, these considerations should not cancel out the importance of working creatively with other organizations and groups – in different contexts or areas of the country - who are better placed to take certain issues forward but who need to know what is happening at the 'front line'. Up-to-date information of this kind is likely to be increasingly important as the consequences of

poverty and social inequalities begin to be felt in terms of life chances and people's quality of life.

But the importance of bringing people into groups and creating alliances in this way also applies to professionals who, like other sections of society, run the risk of becoming isolated from other professionals, defensive and protective of the 'territory' that they have been given or acquired, and 'rule-bound' in their response to the human needs being presented. Yet some resistance to the bureaucratic and managerialist structures that have been imposed on professionals is beginning to emerge. For example, in social work – which has been the subject of serious media, government and public attack for a number of years in the United Kingdom – a network has been established to bring practitioners together to discuss the kind of social work they want to be a part of. In September 2009, the third National Social Work Action Network (SWAN) will be held at the University of Bath (9th-10th September 2009) where key issues, including the importance of groupwork, will be debated. For readers who may be interested in this network and conference, please visit the SWAN website www.socialworkfuture.org.

In relation to the papers presented, this is very much an international edition, with papers from Hong Kong, Australia and the United States of America – yet all have relevance to the kind of groupwork encountered in the United Kingdom and Europe. We begin with a paper by Celia Williamson and Lynda Baker entitled 'Helping victims of prostitution and trafficking: it takes a community' which focuses on the subject of child sex trafficking and street-based prostitution among adult women in a city in the United States. The article describes the outcome of a year-long collaborative 'round table', made up of a range of different agencies and interested parties that were brought together to address the problems inherent in the area of trafficking and prostitution. It is important to note that the trafficking of children into the sex trade is considered an act of modern day slavery by the U.S. government and that UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) estimate that as many as 1.2 million children being trafficked every year. The statistics on the numbers of men and women involved in prostitution are difficult to estimate but both adult prostitution and child trafficking lead to serious social, physical and mental health problems.

Using a combination of large and small groups, the paper describes the processes and dynamics involved in this collaborative project and – importantly – what was achieved in terms of increasing public awareness, developing screening tools to identify vulnerable individuals, early intervention and treatment and working with law enforcement agencies to ensure the successful prosecution of traffickers and pimps. To their credit, the authors also identify two areas of weakness in relation to the prostitution of men and boys and the involvement of schools. Nevertheless, real benefits are outlined in terms of helping ‘to both sensitize and empower a community to respond to its most vulnerable citizens’.

A second article, by Francis Wing-lin and Lee Richel Chen Li explores the ‘Use of *play* with a group of young new arrival students in Hong Kong’. This fascinating paper begins with important background information on the relationship between the Hong Kong, and the Chinese and British governments and describes the situation by which people from mainland China could visit or become legal residents of Hong Kong. In 1997, Britain handed over the sovereignty of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and since that time, 60 one-way permits (OWPs) per year are issued to enable children and young people to become legal residents of Hong Kong. It is this transition that this article describes and the way that play is used to address the needs of a group of nine young new arrivals (YNAs) - four young men and five young women who had been in Hong Kong for less than one year. The authors describe the loneliness and other difficulties experienced in the transition to this new environment and outline the work has having three objectives: (1) enhancing self-understanding, (2) extending young people’s social circle and (3) developing their communication skills. Although the group only met for one hour over seven sessions, the responses of the study group were compared to those of the nine members who made up the control group, and the scores indicate that the three objectives identified had been successfully achieved. This account of the experiences of young arrivals to Hong Kong is an absorbing subject and a paper that draws on an interesting range of sources to describe this work.

Joan Letendre and her colleagues describe the way that effective leadership can bring about organizational change and empower others in an employment setting - or a ‘work group’. Set in the United States,

the article describes 'an overburdened child welfare organization' and how groupwork theory and practice can be used to mobilize staff in order to address an environmental problem where a parent-child visiting room is in need of repair and cleaning. Although this task may appear to be a minor undertaking, as this paper indicates, it is essential to think carefully about the way that groupwork principles and skills can be deployed in an employment setting. For example, in relation to restoring the visiting room the paper provides a detailed account of 'the planning process, recruitment of work group members, development of a common purpose and goals and facilitation of sessions throughout the stages of the group's work'. But from a different perspective, it also describes the important way that morale, and a sense of group cohesion can be enhanced through focusing on a project that has a common purpose. What is valuable about this paper is the importance placed on practitioners developing effective leadership skills and the fact that once acquired, these skills are capable of being transferred across different settings and context. The authors helpfully remind us that in order to achieve this, groupworkers need to have a sound knowledge base and the ability to be openly and honestly analyse the specific style of leadership they bring to an encounter, and the ability to adapt that leadership style in order to achieve agreed and desired outcomes.

A fourth paper by Dianne Beatty and Andrew King, 'Supporting fathers who have a child with a disability: the development of a new parenting program', describes the findings of an Australian pilot programme involving 83 fathers who have children with a disability. This paper draws on a range of publications, including research from the United States on the importance of fathers and parenting and the benefits for children, fathers and mothers, and research from the United Kingdom on the particular difficulties experienced by fathers of disabled children. From this research, the article goes on to describe a ground-breaking programme that has been developed to address the concerns identified, particularly the value that fathers' gain from having the opportunity to speak to other fathers who have children with a disability, and the importance of sharing support strategies, and to understand the extent to which they share common concerns and experiences.

[It was] very interesting meeting different fathers with children that have different disabilities but have the same concerns.

Although this work is described as a programme, what is significant is the fact that the approach is not structured in a rigid way that merely follows a script. For example, in this work facilitators are encouraged to 'complement the material with their own facilitation strengths and experience' – a feature that is often absent in other more UK programme-based approaches. Also, the fact that 'All sessions must be individually tailored to the needs, characteristics and interests of the fathers' – indicates the importance given to encouraging the active participation of fathers and to adapting to the different needs that emerge.

In a final paper by Carol Smith and Darcie Davis-Gage on 'Experiential group training: perceptions of graduate students in counselor education programs' we return to the United States and to the use of experiential groups in counselor education programmes. This paper highlights an important gap in our knowledge in terms of how students perceive the learning and understanding they acquire through their participation in experiential groups. On many counseling training programmes - which accords with my own personal experience – it is assumed that the self disclose and personal issues that are raised in experiential groups enhance students' self awareness, leadership skills, and their understanding of group concepts and processes – and that this knowledge constitutes an essential component of counselor training programmes. However, this paper examines this assumption – using qualitative research methods to analyse the perceptions eleven master's students who volunteers to take part in the study.

In general, this research study indicates that students were able to identify a greater understanding and appreciation of the importance of group experiences and that from an analysis of the data, three general themes could be identified as being of benefit, namely personal learning, group leadership, and group dynamics. Of these, the intrapersonal learning throughout the group experience was identified by students as being an element where they had gained a greater awareness of their thoughts and perceptions. This initial research study is important because it tests assumptions that are so easily made about the value of different approaches within groupwork – and it would be our hope that this work gives rise to further quality studies of this kind.

Book reviews

Included in this edition are two reviews. The first, by Oded Manor, is a review of *Groupwork Practice in Social Work* by Trevor Lindsay and Sue Orton.

In a second review, Jennie Fleming looks at the fourth edition of *Empowerment, Participation and Social Work* by Robert Adams.

Happy reading!

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